

Sticks and stones

By Sharif Islam, a dentist in London, UK

I am fortunate that I had very good parents. They lavished upon me the two essential things that children of all intelligent mammals crave: a parent's unconditional love and approval. I have thus never needed it from anywhere else nor felt compelled to join the apparently insecure masses constantly craving validation from total strangers on social media. Platforms that have undoubtedly made self-expression more available and freer, but have also become safe spaces from which to launch tirades of abuse and vitriol. While great freedom also demands great responsibility, social media has seemingly increased the former without checking on the latter.

Dental professionals have not escaped this abuse. The media has highlighted the mass diving of dentists off the sinking NHS galleon, bemoaning their rescue by private sector lifeboats as they row themselves away to a more prosperous and harmonious life. And as with any story of the day or week, whenever there is attention on something it will also invite admonition and contempt.

Much of it is sadly aimed at dentists themselves, amplifying a culturally popular narrative that dentists are universally riven with avarice and blasting it through the megaphone of online protest. That NHS dentists want to get paid anything at all in spite of their punishingly long days and mounting expenses is apparently enough of a spark to ignite the wrath of many.

Dentists do understand patients' frustrations and their valid right to have them. And at no time is this frustration more acute than when a patient is in pain. But none of us really understand how this is tempered by hurling abuse at anyone. It doesn't lessen the pain, not least because the protest is aimed at the wrong lobby.

Some members of the public have suggested that dentists who dare to leave the NHS have no shame and should feel tremendous guilt for abandoning those poor patients that are suffering excruciating cavities and bleeding gums. Well, someone will have to explain to me why a dentist should feel guilty for the amount of sugar their patient consumes or their lack of oral hygiene. I realise we now live in a world of absolved responsibility but I am certain we do our part. And why should anyone feel shame for seeking a better work-life balance, less stress and more remuneration? When our patients tell us that they have found a more rewarding job don't we congratulate them? Pretty sure we don't chide or chastise them.

Some groups have even formed online demanding a law that mandates dentists to perform the majority of their work for the NHS. And, golly, don't we all want to live under a totalitarian socialist regime too, so good luck with that. Take a cab in Cuba and the driver will likely be one of their dentists or doctors. It is surprising that such groups cannot foresee such a law only accelerating the exodus of dentists from the profession and even the country, achieving the exact opposite of their objective.

Ah, but the public is entitled to NHS dental care and everyone is contributing to it after all. This is true. But dentists aren't the ones appropriating your cash and allocating a paltry amount of it to their profession. You'll have to talk to someone else about that. (And I do mean talk, please, not hurl abuse or threats.) Ah, but the public paid the taxes that paid for their training and thus dentists should feel obliged to give something back. Not entirely true, as many dental students are paying fees for their tuition, and about a third of registrants trained overseas. And in any event, the dentist themselves endured the gruelling years of dental school (I say gruelling, I slept through most of it), stress, long nights trying to finish that utterly pointless community dentistry project, anxiety trying to find a vocational training position and subsequent post, only to fend off a rampant complaints culture and a hostile public profile. In contrast to other nations, it does seem like an overwhelming sense of entitlement has supplanted an appreciation of merit.

Not that dentists yearn for anyone's sympathy. They won't even ask for a smidgen of the empathy they try to bestow upon their patients. And it is sad that some dental professionals have been 'triggered' enough to rebuke the online attacks by justifying their exit from the NHS. As long as they are legal and ethical no one needs to justify the decisions they make for themselves, their

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work, or their life to anyone, least of all to strangers with a lack of knowledge but an abundance of fury.

Civil discourse in recent times has become anything but civil, with social media enabling a greater polarisation of society than ever before. And in order to be heard and noticed some people feel they have to scream increasingly incisive invective, direct it at everyone but their own reflection, and all from the comfort of their own phone or computer. I don't really believe the majority of people wake up in the morning with the express intention of abusing or offending anyone, so it should be water off a duck's back.

Dental professionals, whether dentists, nurses or hygienists, want to help people. They feel a great sense of pride when they resolve a patient's ailment and improve their health. But they are also people and, as such, are allowed to have the same aspirations as everyone else, namely a better working life with manageable hours and stress, and yes, a remuneration reflecting their skill, time and investment in the work. It is simply a reality not of their making that those ambitions are more likely to be realised outside the NHS. If that is reason enough to invite a tsunami of abuse then searching questions probably need to be asked about society's values, civility and its understanding of what the profession entails and how it is funded.

Until then just try to ignore it. That's better for *your* health. ■ ✦